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Nelson County

'Transplants' Seek Refuge In Hill Country Setting

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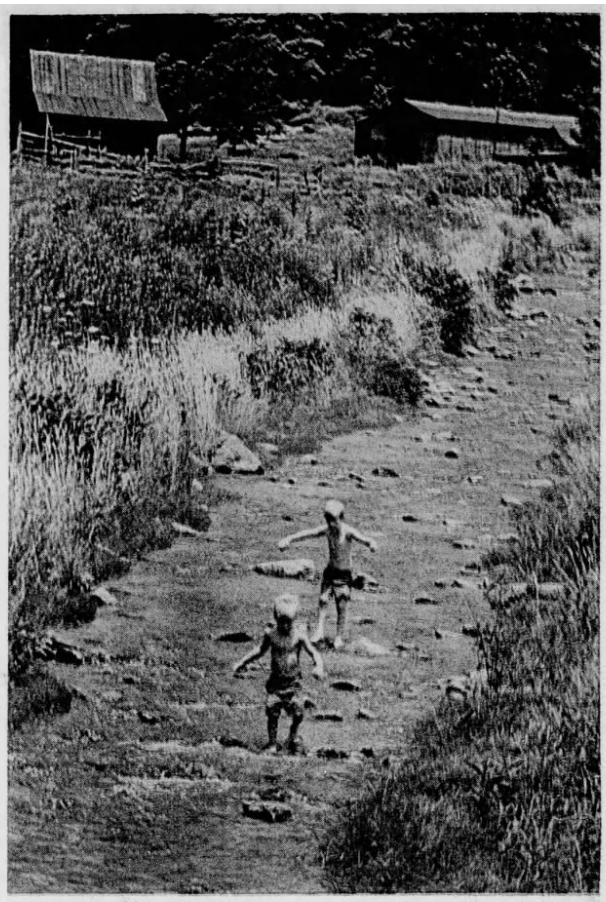

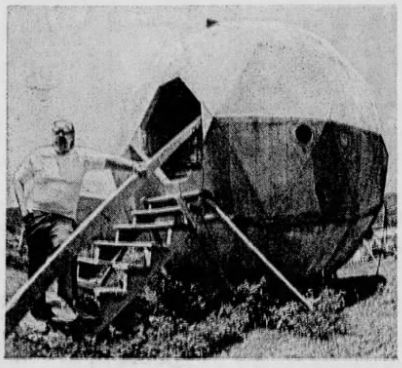

Contrasts
Joe Campbell, a self-described 'catastrophist,' poses with his geodesic dome, dubbed a 'doomcraft.' Nearby (right photo), Hat Creek provides a sylvan setting for youngsters to cool off on a hot summer's day.

ROSELAND — It was in the spring of 1973, four years after Hurricane Camille unleased its torrents over Nelson County, that Joe Campbell took a walk in the dense forest behind his farmhouse and discovered the landslide.

A gigantic sheet of granite behind Campbell's farm in Roseland had fallen away from its mountain perch, exposing perhaps for the first time in millions of years its impressive interior face.

The stone mountain from which the rock had tumbled had always been there, concedes Campbell, "but I realized I was probably the first human being ever to see the inside of the formation. It was awe-inspiring."

The new rock, pinkish gray and vibrant in the summer sunlight, sits like a stone leviathan a few hundred yards from where Camille's fury claimed the lives of a local postmaster's family, the former owners of the Campbell farm.

AS CAMPBELL SEES IT, the rock may be nature's monument to the more than 140 county residents who perished during the storm and, just as significant, a testament to the newness and change that have swept Nelson like a flood during the nine intervening years.

Just as Camille changed forever vast portions of the county's landscape — rechanneling rivers, stripping bare entire mountainsides and once-verdant pastures — a wave of another sort, human, has overcome much of the sorrow that was left behind.

There is a new vitality in Nelson, reflected in people like Campbell, who left a successful career as a national broadcast correspondent to become an iconoclastic farmer and, five years later, something of a local sage.

They call themselves "transplants" and hundreds of them have come here, ranging from those seeking the simple group lifestyle at the Shannon Farm commune to those whose affluence affords them priceless mountain vistas and vacation homes at the Wintergreen ski resort.

They have come to a place where mountainmen once raised hogs and manufactured "white lightning" whiskey in copper-kettled stills, where the strains of hill country bluegrass ballads mixed frequently with the pungent odor of their corn distillations. Now bulldozers clear the way for $100,000 ski lodges there and psychic researchers explore the limits of consciousness.

THE BLUEGRASS STRAINS still stir the air around Lovingston, the county seat, at small cafes and truck stops on hot summer afternoons and on cooler Friday nights.

But 15 miles away, the pulsating beat of "Georgia Rock" provides the background for conversations in The Copper Mine, a posh nightclub at Wintergreen, a rapidly growing resort that has enabled an industry-poor county to keep its fiscal head above water during the past few years.

Contemporary ski lodges and other symbols of conspicuous consumption — a championship mountaintop golf course, for instance — abound where once was one of the state's major logging operations. Some of the old logging roads are covered with weeds, while others have been paved over and are more frequently traveled by sports cars and recreational vehicles than by trucks.

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Below and beside the ski slopes is a different side of Nelson and a decidedly different set of immigrants.

There is Lao Russell, the mistress of Swannanoa, the fortress-like edifice of the University of Philosophy and Science. From the elevated palace on Afton Mountain near Skyline Drive, filled with the artistic and philosophical works of her late husband, New York sculptor Dr. Walter Russell, she has for the past 30 years dispensed advice and conciousness-raising wisdom to a claimed worldwide following of from 30,000 to 50,000 people.

Nearby, Robert A. Monroe, a 62-year-old former television executive and founder of the Monroe Institute for Applied Sciences, experiments with out-of-body experiences. An institute "explorer team" reputedly has ventured to the outer limits of consciousness, which Monroe refers to cryptically as "Focus 18" but declines to describe.

Fifteen miles south from Afton along the Blue Ridge, John Koehne, a former Central Intelligence Agency Analyst, his wife Ana and their family operate the Dharma Self-help and Analytical Center. Converts to the Sikh religion, a 600-year-old Indian sect, they teach courses in polarity therapy, yoga, massage and energy processes on their 225-acre farm, forer formerly known as Oakland.

A FEW MILES AWAY, Campbell, a self-described "catastrophist," continues his work on a mammoth geodesic dome he refers to as a "doomcraft." Campbell also has taken up the study of universal languages in an effort to communicate with what he calls "the unrecognized hemisphere" of the mind.

For Nelson County, the activities of Koehne, Monroe, Campbell and Mrs. Russell have produced some changes. The materially-impoverished mountain community, whose panoramic vistas are said to constitute the very heart of a regional psychic "energy center," has become the site of a nationally unique psychic research colony.

Although they are aware of each other's works and proximity — aware, as Campbell maintains, "that something is happening here" — they profess little knowledge of why, or how it is happening.

They note that Edgar Cayce, founder of the Virginia Beach-based Association for Research and Enlightenment, one of the oldest and largest psychic research centers in the nation, has called the Central Virginia area a "major energy center."

"It is a sacred place," agreed Mrs. Russell. "It does things to people," things like "tranquility, solemnity, exultation."

"It reminds me of northern California during the mid-sixties," explained Tarn Tarn Sing, Koehne's son-in-law and a permanent resident of the dharma center.

"Back then, Mendicino County was the commune capital of the world."

Nelson has communes, the largest of which is Shannon Farm, populated by about 50 persons. But communal outposts also thrive elsewhere in Virginia, most notably in Louisa County, home of Twin Oaks Community and Cedar Ridge.

"It's hard to put into words what is going on here," Campbell said. "If you say it's part of a movement, people want to know who the leaders are and where the movement's headed. I don't think any of us could tell you that."

Campbell's descriptions of the phenomenon are dominated by words such as "subtle" and "elusive," even though the formation of unself-conscious colony has spanned three decades, beginning with the Russells moving to Swannanoa in 1949.

AND YET, most of those involved in Nelson's psychic community seem intuitively aware of its existence and sense the fact that their particular studies — whether catastrophism, meditation or the separation of mind from body — are not entirely congruent with the mores and values of the mountain country.

Nelson County, after all, has long been better known for its mountain music, moonshine and devastating floods than for Plato's "harmony of the spheres."

"There is a non-hostile division between the newcomers and the natives," asserted Campbell. "They've come to realize that much of what they've already accomplished — self-reliance, dependence upon the earth — is what we are seeking."

Sing Calls his Nelson County neighbors "the friendliest people I've ever met. They give freely and accept unquestioningly."

Although they tolerate the psychic goings-on and have befriended the researchers in many instances, few native Nelsonians have gone so far as to join in the research efforts to enroll in the esoteric self-improvement courses spon-

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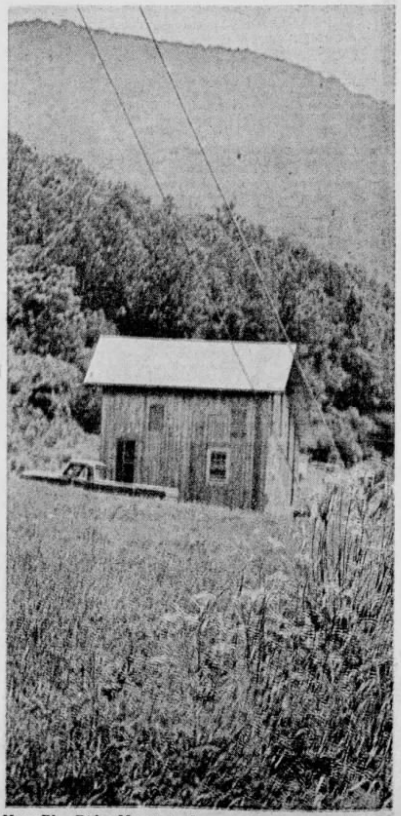
Patricia Bibb, Miss Nelson County, Enjoys Rural Atmosphere That Draws Newcomers



Hazy Blue Ridge Mountains Loom in Background of Cabin

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sored by the dharma and Monroe centers, Sing said.

That may be because "they've already arrived at the place others are seeking when they come to us," he surmised. "They take things in stride and are relaxed." In other words, Sing suggested, having spent their lives in the area, the natives have been "energized" already.

Lao Russell said she had a "vision" of Swannanoa and the surrounding countryside three years before she and her husband took over the rambling marble mansion.

Campbell bought his "Turning Earth Farm" because it was "quite simply, the most beautiful place I'd ever seen," he said.

Sing and his wife, Koehne's daughter Priscilla, are considering "spending the rest of our lives" at Oakland, Sing said.

"I've come to the conclusion," he explained, "that it may now be more difficult to live an unhappy life in Nelson County than to live a happy one."

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Interspersed among the large granite formations along the eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge are large dike-like deposits of another substance, a titanium-rich mineral called nelsonite, so named in the early 1900s by Virginia mineralogist Thomas L. Watson.

For more than 30 years, ending in 1970 — the greenish-black mineral provided jobs and security for hundreds of workers at the American Cyanamid plant at Piney River, which produced titanium-based paint pigments for national distribution.

Suddenly, the year after Camille struck, American Cyanamid announced it was closing its huge mineral processing facility. The company cited poor economic climate, outdated plant and increasingly stringent anti-pollution regulations as reasons for the move.

Dozens of employees, many of them with as many as 30 years on the job, were cast into retirement with few benefits. It appeared that the bottom of the county's economy had fallen out, adding insult to the misery brought by Camille.

A DECADE LATER, another mining company, the U.S. Titanium Corp., has announced plans to revive the old nelsonite operation. After protracted negotiations with the state Water Control Board — negotiations prompted by a fish kill at the minesite that destroyed an estimated 72,000 game fish and minnows last year in the Piney River basin — the company has begun removing mine wastes from the river banks near its plant.

The hope, expressed cautiously by county officials and other Nelson residents, is that the mining operation will begin breathing new life into the local economy beginning next year.

"The nelsonite has always been here," Campbell said. Like the rock that split off from the mountain behind Campbell's farm, it too may symbolize a revitalization, a recovery from the years of elemental and economic hardship Nelson's natives and newcomers have known.